



The Narrative Policy Framework: A Traveler’s Guide to Policy Stories

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Abstract The last decade has seen the rise of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) as a valuable theoretical framework for advancing knowledge of the policy process. In this article, we investigate the NPF’s “travel” capacities across geographies, political systems, policy fields, levels of analysis, methodological approaches, and other theories of the policy process. We assess these capabilities by reviewing extant research and mapping newly explored territories. While we find that the NPF embodies all necessary conditions to travel to different settings, the empirical applications remain largely confined to the U.S. and European contexts, environmental policy, the meso level of analysis, the use of content analysis of documents as a methodological approach, and only a few combinations with other theories of the policy process. Our findings indicate that the NPF can travel well. However, we call for further research to conceptualize the NPF’s macro level, to replicate NPF scholarship beyond liberal democratic institutional contexts, and to affirm the framework’s capacity to be generalizable in varied settings.

Keywords Narrative Policy Framework · Narrative Analysis · Theories of the policy process · Public policy · Context

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Das Narrative Policy Framework: Ein Reiseführer für Policy-Narrative

Zusammenfassung In den letzten zehn Jahren hat sich das Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) zum wegweisenden theoretischen Rahmen bei der Erklärung der Rolle von Narrativen in Politikgestaltungsprozessen entwickelt. Dieser Artikel untersucht die Kapazitäten des NPF, in anderen Regionen und politischen Systemen, neuen Politikfeldern, Analyseebenen und methodologischen Ansätzen sowie in Kombination mit weiteren Theorien des Politikprozesses angewandt zu werden. Diese „Reisefähigkeit“ des NPF wird anhand eines systematischen Reviews der bestehenden NPF-Literatur bewertet. Dabei werden neue, kürzlich erkundete Territorien speziell hervorgehoben. Das systematische Review zeigt, dass das NPF zwar alle notwendigen Bedingungen erfüllt, um in verschiedene Umgebungen zu reisen. Trotzdem beschränken sich bisherige empirische Anwendungen des NPF weitgehend auf die amerikanischen und europäischen Kontexte, die Umweltpolitik, die Meso-Ebene der Analyse, die Inhaltsanalyse von Dokumenten und auf nur wenige Kombinationen mit anderen Theorien des Politikprozesses. Diese Ergebnisse weisen darauf hin, dass das NPF grundsätzlich gut reisen kann. Wir fordern jedoch weitere Forschung, um die Makro-Ebene des NPF zu konzeptualisieren, NPF-Forschung außerhalb von liberal-demokratischen Systemen zu replizieren und die Generalisierbarkeit des NPF in verschiedenen Kontexten zu bestätigen.

Schlüsselwörter Narrative Policy Framework · Narrative Analysis · Theorien über den politischen Prozess · Öffentliche Politik · Kontext

1 Introduction

While the study of the essential nature of stories has traveled well across humanities and art scholarship, empirically focused narrative research in policy studies is relatively new. Since 2010, the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) has offered a systematic approach to understanding the role of narratives in the policy process (Jones and McBeth 2010; Shanahan et al. 2017). The NPF originated in the institutional context of the United States, being applied primarily in the field of environmental policy. Over the last decade, the number of NPF applications has grown significantly (Pierce et al. 2014; Jones 2018). Scholars have increasingly applied the NPF to new institutional contexts and policy fields, experimented with different methodologies, employed the framework in tandem with other theories of the policy process, and linked different levels of analysis (Jones 2018). In short, the emergence of these NPF studies has resulted in a new and vibrant cohort of scholars studying the impact of a new set of variables and hypotheses anchored in the understanding of the power of narratives in the policy process.

In a 2014 assessment of the NPF, Weible and Schlager (2014, p. 245) argued that “the NPF has yet to reach its goal of being a portable framework for analyzing policy narratives.” Eight years later, we explore the NPF’s maturation through its potential to travel across geographies, political systems, policy fields, levels of analysis, methodological approaches, and other theories of the policy process to assess the

framework's portability. Recent scholarship has argued that the framework travels well across different contexts because of the universal importance of narratives for human cognition, the NPF's structural approach that allows for generalization and comparison, the framework's methodological openness, and concepts that are applicable to multiple levels of analysis (Smith-Walter and Jones 2020). Nonetheless, the NPF is a relatively new framework, and core concepts continue to be further clarified as the NPF is applied to new fields and contexts (e.g., Kuhlmann and Blum 2021). While the argument of its portability seems plausible, the scholarly reach of the NPF into new territories remains nascent.

This article aims to investigate the NPF's travel capacities. More precisely, we seek to answer the following research question: What needs to be considered when applying the NPF outside of its main spheres of application? To answer this conceptual question, we first conducted a systematic review of extant NPF research to document where and how the NPF has been applied. The objective of this review was to map the new territories that the NPF has explored outside of its original context—not only in terms of geography and policy fields, but also concerning its application to different levels of analysis, its use of varied methods of data collection and analysis, and the NPF's use with other theories of the policy process such as the Multiple Streams Framework and the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework. Second, in this article we assess the NPF's applicability across different contexts, discuss what needs to be considered when applying the NPF outside of its main spheres of application, identify limits of the framework, and point to gaps and avenues for further research.

Our results suggest that the NPF has not yet traveled very far. Most empirical applications study the U.S. context, much of which are focused on environmental policy issues. They are confined to an analysis of the framework's meso and, to a lesser extent, micro levels; the use of social media and visual narratives as data sources is only emerging; and the potential of combining the NPF with other theories of the policy process remains underexplored. Nonetheless, we confirm that the NPF exhibits all necessary requirements to be applicable in new contexts. We highlight some new fields of the NPF, such as the study of narrative strategies in nondemocratic contexts and the replication of experimental studies in another context. We argue that the NPF has considerable traveling capacity, but the NPF's assumptions and the relevance of the framework to answer research questions in new contexts need to be considered when applying it outside of its traditional spheres of application.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we introduce the NPF and present its assumptions as well as its aspirations to provide a generalizable framework to study policy narratives. Second, the conceptual and methodological approaches for the systematic review are described. Next, we present the territories where the NPF has traveled and identify newly explored territory. The discussion and conclusion summarize points that need to be taken into account when applying the NPF elsewhere and point to avenues for future research.

2 Narrative Policy Framework Assumptions

The NPF is a theoretical framework that specifies common assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses for the study of policy narratives (Shanahan et al. 2017) and provides guidance on how to conduct empirical research on the role of said narratives in the policy process (Shanahan et al. 2018). To examine how well the NPF can be applied to varied contexts, we first introduce the NPF's core assumptions (Shanahan et al. 2017, pp. 178–179):

- *Social construction matters in public policy*: The NPF acknowledges that an objective world independent of human perceptions exists. However, people assign different meanings to the world around them. For the study of public policy, it is important to examine how individuals and groups construct social reality.
- *Bounded relativity*: While the social constructions of reality can create different social realities, these realities are not random; rather, they are bounded by beliefs, norms, ideas, strategies, and their contexts.
- *Policy narratives have generalizable structural elements*: Conceptually, the NPF distinguishes between two narrative components: form and content. Form refers to the structural elements that compose a narrative, typically defined as a setting, characters (such as heroes, villains, and victims), a plot, and a moral of the story. The NPF posits that while the content of narratives may vary across contexts, structural elements are generalizable. For example, the content of a story about fracking told by a Scottish environmentalist (Stephan 2020) is certainly different from the story told by a right-wing populist who attacks a public agency in Switzerland (Kuenzler 2021). However, these stories share common structural elements: They take place in a setting, contain characters, have a plot, and often champion a moral.
- *Policy narratives operate at three levels*: The NPF assumes that narratives can be examined at three different, yet interacting, levels. At the micro level, the NPF is concerned with how individuals shape and are influenced by narratives; the meso level examines how groups of actors and coalitions use narratives in a policy subsystem; and the macro level focuses on overarching narratives that are embedded in cultural and institutional contexts.
- *The homo narrans model of the individual*: The NPF identifies ten postulates derived from an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that allow the assumption that narratives play a central role in how individuals organize, assess, and communicate information (Shanahan et al. 2017, pp. 180–183).

The assumptions of a framework are the first step in assessing how well any framework can travel, and in our assessment, NPF assumptions are a good basis for traveling capacity (Smith-Walter and Jones 2020). First, the assumption of a structural approach to narratives allows scholars across different contexts to reliably identify narrative elements such as the setting, plots, characters, and a moral. The NPF has long argued that these elements are universal to storytelling and can therefore be generalized and compared across contexts (Shanahan et al. 2017). Second, the *homo narrans* model of the individual assumes that narratives are central to human cognition independent of context. This universality of narratives has been recog-

nized by a variety of literatures such as psychology (e.g., Green and Brock 2005), neuroscience (e.g., Armstrong 2020), marketing (e.g., van den Hende et al. 2012), and linguistics (Gjerstad and Fløttum 2021), among others. As such, narratives are a part of policy processes across policy issues and geographies. Third, the concepts of the NPF are also applicable to different levels of analysis, as the NPF assumes that narratives operate simultaneously at three levels (micro, meso, and macro). This assumption reveals the NPF's ability to travel not only within levels of analysis but between them. Fourth, the NPF favors a methodological openness. Although the NPF had, at first, emphasized quantitative approaches to narratives (Jones and McBeth 2010), its coupling of an objective epistemology with a social constructivist ontology (Jones and Radaelli 2015) also encourages the use of qualitative methods (Gray and Jones 2016).

3 Conceptual and Methodological Approach

In order to assess how the NPF may be applied outside of its main spheres of application, we first analyzed extant NPF studies to determine where and how the NPF has been applied. A systematic review of NPF research focused on five dimensions of travel: geographic and political contexts, policy fields, levels of analysis, methodological approaches, and the use of the NPF with other policy process theories.

Data collection: To identify NPF research, we first conducted a systematic search in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The search term “narrative policy framework” was used for the search in both databases. We included articles, book chapters, and books, but excluded conference papers and book reviews. We included all articles that contained the English term “narrative policy framework” in their text (excluding their bibliography) and were published online before July 2021.¹ Moreover, we also searched the open access journal *International Review of Public Policy*, an academic publication relevant for policy process research but not yet included in the databases because of its recent foundation in 2019. Finally, we consulted a database developed by other NPF researchers for gaps in our own data collection, to which there were few omissions.²

This search strategy resulted in 162 total articles. Three articles were excluded because of lack of access (Apriliyanti et al. 2021; Kirkpatrick 2017; Wendler 2021). Two additional articles were excluded during the coding process, as these articles mentioned the NPF only in passing (Irvin 2019; Menon and Suresh 2020). A total of 157 articles were included in the analysis.

Data analysis: For our analysis, we coded the 157 articles according to a systematic coding scheme (Appendix, Table 7). In a first step, we coded whether the articles present empirical research or are of a theoretical nature. Of the 157 articles, 124

¹ All articles but two were in English. We decided to leave the two foreign language articles that use the term “narrative policy framework” in English in our database; one is in German (Hildbrand et al. 2020), and the other one is in Portuguese (Camargo 2020).

² These NPF data were collected by Dr. Geoboo Song, Rachel Moyer, and Brianna Huett (University of Arkansas).

(79%) were empirical and 33 (21%) were theoretical. We then coded the empirical articles along our five variables of interest:

1. Geographic and political context: For this variable, we coded the country or countries the empirical NPF application focused on and then categorized the countries according to their political regimes. To classify political regimes, we used the regimes of the world classification that categorizes countries into four different regime types: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy (Lührmann et al. 2018).
2. Policy field: We coded which policy fields were the focus of each empirical NPF article. The list of policy fields was developed inductively. Overall, we found 15 policy fields, such as environmental, health, and education policy, as well as one category for others (see the coding scheme in Table 7 in the Appendix for a full list).
3. Level of analysis: For each article, we coded whether the empirical analysis was done at the micro (individual), meso (group), or macro (cultural or institutional) level or in combinations of two or three levels.
4. Methodological approach: We used three different variables to assess the methodological approach used in an NPF study. For the first variable, we identified the methods used in the articles according to the following four categories: surveys, interviews, content analysis, or observation. With the second variable, we coded for methodological strategy (Bryman 2016): qualitative, quantitative, or mixed. For the articles using content analysis, we used a third variable to code the data sources used for content analysis. For this variable, we first qualitatively coded which data sources were used. In a second step, we summarized these data sources into nine categories: newspaper, offline documents, online documents, transcripts (such as transcripts of parliamentary debates), direct communication, social media, video, academic articles, or expert articles (Appendix, Table 8).
5. Using the NPF with other theories of the policy process: For this category, we coded other theories of the policy process included in the empirical NPF applications. We accounted for the six theories of the policy process detailed in *Theories of the Policy Process*, third edition (Sabatier and Weible 2014): the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD), innovation and diffusion models of policy research, and the social construction of target groups (SCTG).

The articles were all coded by one of the authors. To ensure reliability, we randomly selected one third of all articles (53 articles) to be coded by a second author. Appropriate levels of intercoder reliability (percentage agreement and Krippendorff's alpha) were achieved for all variables (Appendix, Table 9). According to Krippendorff (2003), scores of alpha greater than 0.8 are considered appropriate, while scores between 0.67 and 0.8 allow for drawing tentative conclusions. Our Krippendorff's alpha values were all greater than 0.8 except for the measure for coding theories, which amounted to 0.79.

In addition to the analysis of the empirical NPF articles, we also considered the 33 theoretical NPF articles. We used these publications for our evaluation of the traveling capacity of the NPF.

4 Findings: Where the NPF Has and Has Not Traveled

In this section, we present the results of the systematic review and identify new potential fields of application for the NPF. We first describe in what geographic and political contexts the NPF has been applied. Next, we examine the policy fields explored by NPF studies before turning to the levels of analysis used in NPF research. The subsequent sections review methodological approaches and the use of the NPF with other theories of the policy process.

4.1 Geographic Journeys of the NPF

The large majority (85%, $n = 106$) of the 124 empirical NPF articles examine public policies within a single country. Only seven articles (5%) include several countries.³ Eight additional articles have a regional focus; among those, five focus on the European Union (Cristoforetti and Querton 2019; Palm et al. 2021; Radaelli et al. 2013; Tosun and Schaub 2021; Vogeler et al. 2021), two on the Mekong region (Lebel and Lebel 2018, 2019), and one on West Africa (Soremi 2019). Three have a global focus and examine international organizations (Beck 2018; Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017; Gjerstad 2017).

Table 1 Geographic focus of single-country Narrative Policy Framework studies

Country	<i>n</i>	%	Regime
United States	74	69.8	Liberal democracy
India	7	6.6	Electoral democracy
Germany	4	3.8	Liberal democracy
Finland	3	2.8	Liberal democracy
Norway	3	2.8	Liberal democracy
Switzerland	3	2.8	Liberal democracy
United Kingdom	3	2.8	Liberal democracy
Brazil	2	1.9	Electoral democracy
Indonesia	2	1.9	Electoral democracy
Sweden	2	1.9	Liberal democracy
Australia	1	0.9	Liberal democracy
Belgium	1	0.9	Liberal democracy
Russia	1	0.9	Electoral autocracy
<i>Total</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>100</i>	–

³ These studies have the following geographic focus: Germany and the United Kingdom (Mintrom et al. 2021); the European Union, Finland, Ireland, and Malta (Dunlop et al. 2021); the United States and Germany (Arnold 2019); the United States, the European Union, Australia, and Canada (O'Leary et al. 2017); the United States and India (Oztig 2016); the United States and Mexico (Lybecker et al. 2015); and the United States and the United Kingdom (O'Bryan et al. 2014).

In examining the geographic focus of the single-country studies, Table 1 reveals that the NPF has been overwhelmingly applied in the U.S. context: 69.8% (74 of 106) of the single-country studies are U.S. NPF applications, while six of the eight multicountry studies include the United States as one of the countries under study. Only a handful of studies focus on Europe or Asian countries, while applications in Latin America and Africa remain scant.

This limited geographic focus of the NPF also implies that the framework has almost exclusively been applied in liberal democracies. Only a few studies apply it in electoral democracies, such as Brazil (e.g., Camargo 2020), India (e.g., Huda 2019), and Indonesia (e.g., Leong 2015). Applications of the NPF in nondemocratic regimes remain an exception: Only one study in our database applies the NPF in an electoral autocracy, Russia (Schlauffer et al. 2021b). In addition, one of the studies at the global level examines the statements of different countries in international climate negotiations, among them China, a closed autocracy (Gjerstad 2017).

4.2 New Territories Explored by the NPF

Our analysis of extant NPF research shows that the NPF has not yet traveled to many countries outside the United States. This raises the question of why the NPF has not ventured forth into many new territories. Is this mainly because the NPF is a relatively new framework? After all, getting to know a theoretical framework in different regions of the world takes time. The first applications of the NPF outside the United States began to appear in 2013 (Radaelli et al. 2013) and, especially, in 2014 with the publication of the book *Science of Stories* (Jones et al. 2014), which included applications in Europe and India (Gupta et al. 2014; Ney 2014; O'Bryan et al. 2014). Or has the NPF not traveled far because there are limitations to applying the framework in different geographic contexts?

To address these questions, we highlight recent NPF applications that have explored new territories: the application of the framework in nondemocratic political systems and the application of the NPF across different languages in a non-Western cultural context.

How well the NPF can be applied in nondemocratic systems was tested in a recent study (Schlauffer et al. 2021a).⁴ This meso-level study of urban policy debates in the institutional context of an electoral autocracy (Russia) argues that the NPF is a useful framework to examine how governmental and oppositional actors communicate about policy in nondemocratic contexts. However, the study also emphasizes that restrictions to the freedom of expression and limitations to venues of public debates (such as parliaments, media, or the internet) confine the plurality of narratives that can circulate, thereby creating an uneven debate in favor of the government. The authors also argue that the influence of critical narratives on policy decisions in authoritarian regimes is limited. This raises the question of how relevant the NPF is in institutional contexts that do not allow for open public debates and in places where debates do not have influence on policy processes.

⁴ This study was not included in our database because it was published in August 2021, and the database includes only articles published up to July 2021. We still consider it here for the discussion.

Another recent NPF application focused on the NPF's applicability in non-Western cultural contexts by examining how well the NPF travels to other languages (Huda 2019). The study compared English and Hindi news coverage and found that all narrative elements were present in the English and Hindi texts. These findings confirm that narrative elements are transferable across different linguistic and cultural contexts, and they support the argument that the NPF's structural approach allows for the transferability of the framework (Huda 2019). However, the author also found that the types and number of narrative elements used differed between the two languages. For example, Hindi texts used different types of characters and proposed different solutions than the English texts did. This might suggest that different narrative content prevails in different cultural or socioeconomic contexts.

4.3 Traveling to Other Policy Fields

The NPF was originally applied primarily to environmental policy debates (Pierce et al. 2014). Indeed, we found that NPF studies published in the first phase of the development of the NPF are mostly about environmental policy: Of the 12 studies published before 2014 (when the book *Science of Stories* [Jones et al. 2014] was published), only one study does not analyze environmental policy (Radaelli et al. 2013). In the aggregate, we found that around one third (33.9%, $n=42$) of empirical NPF articles examine environmental policy (Table 2). However, the NPF has increasingly been applied to a greater variety of public policy fields. Studies on energy policy (including fracking), health policy, and gun control are common. In examining policy fields of more recent scholarship, we found that of the 47 NPF studies between 2019 and 2021, only 9 (19.1%) are about environmental policy. The others examine policy issues as diverse as child protection (Kuenzler 2021, coded

Table 2 Policy fields in Narrative Policy Framework studies

Policy field	<i>n</i>	%
Environmental policy	42	33.9
Energy policy	10	8.1
Health policy	8	6.5
Gun control	8	6.5
Urban policy and transportation	7	5.6
Migration	7	5.6
Education policy	6	4.8
Social policy	6	4.8
Science and technology	5	4.0
Institutional policies	4	3.2
Economic and finance policy	4	3.2
Campaign finance	3	2.4
Drug policy	2	1.6
Criminal justice	2	1.6
Other/various policies	10	8.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>124</i>	<i>100</i>

under the category “social policy”), Islamophobia, and migrant beggars (Clemons et al. 2020; Mostowska 2021; coded under the category “migration”).

4.4 The NPF’s Focus on Contentious Policy Issues

These results suggest that the NPF is a framework that may be used to examine policy narratives in the context of many different policy issues. When Table 2 is compared with other lists of policy fields,⁵ not many gaps can be identified.

However, most studies apply the NPF to highly contentious and salient issues, given that the NPF’s objects of research usually are public policy debates. This is not surprising because these very public issues are often the more politicized, and it seems likely that researchers would be attentive to them. Moreover, data for such research are also likely easier to acquire than for low-salience issues. One recent study applied the NPF to policies that are not characterized by high levels of public attention (Vogeler et al. 2021). This study found that nonpoliticized debates include fewer of the typical NPF characters (heroes, villains, victims) but use the beneficiary character more frequently to emphasize benefits of policies.

4.5 Traveling Through Different Levels of Analysis

The preponderance (75.8%, $n=94$) of empirical NPF applications uses the meso level of analysis, which typically consists of narratives deployed by coalitions and groups of policy actors in a specific policy subsystem. In our database, 21% ($n=26$) of the articles employ the micro level of analysis, focusing on how individuals form and are informed by narratives. Only four empirical studies (3.2%) include more than one level. The macro level, which focuses on institutional or cultural narratives, was included in only one of the empirical NPF applications in our database (Table 3).

The choice of level of analysis also differs according to the geographic context of the NPF applications. Micro-level analyses have almost exclusively been conducted in the U.S. context, with 24 of the 26 micro-level applications (92%) centered in the U.S. context. The two micro-level exceptions are studies on Norway (Gjerstad and Fløttum 2021; Jones et al. 2017). Also, the three studies that include the micro and meso levels were conducted in the United States (Arnold 2019; Boscarino

Table 3 Levels of analysis of Narrative Policy Framework applications

Level of analysis	<i>n</i>	%
Meso level	94	75.8
Micro level	26	21.0
Micro and meso levels	3	2.4
Meso and macro levels	1	0.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>124</i>	<i>100</i>

⁵ Such lists include the policy fields used in the code book of the Comparative Agendas Project (Comparative Agendas Project 2022). Public policy fields that are not included in Table 2, such as foreign policy and defense policy, are covered by NPF studies but are included in the category “others” (Ceccoli 2019; O’Bryan et al. 2014); the NPF studies in the field of agriculture concern agrotechnology and were included in the category “science and technology” (Huda 2018, 2019, 2021; Vogeler et al. 2021).

2022; Bragg and Soler 2017). The geographic focus of meso-level studies is more diverse, with 54 of the 94 (57%) NPF studies in the U.S. context and 40 using other geographic contexts.

4.6 Levels of Analysis To Be Explored

Our analysis of existing empirical NPF research points to two fields that largely remain unexplored but have partly been addressed by recent NPF studies.

First, there are hardly any micro-level studies outside the United States. A considerable number of NPF micro-level studies in the U.S. context have examined how narratives affect individual preferences and opinions and have generated knowledge about the persuasiveness of narratives (e.g., Husmann 2015; Jones 2014; Jones and Song 2014; McBeth et al. 2014; Shanahan et al. 2011, 2014). However, not much is known about how the persuasiveness of narratives might vary in different contexts. Only one study has addressed this question outside the United States by replicating, in Norway, an experiment from the American context on the role of characters in shaping opinions about climate change (Jones et al. 2017). While the Norwegian study confirmed the main results from the United States, namely, that the hero has a high level of influence on opinion in climate change narratives, the study in Norway did not find the same drivers of affect toward the hero character. This may suggest that the persuasion of narratives can have contextual explanations (Jones et al. 2017). More research at the micro level outside the U.S. context is needed to examine which stories are persuasive in which contexts.

Second, the NPF's macro level of analysis is used in several theoretical NPF articles or literature reviews (e.g., Ertas and McKnight 2019; Jones and McBeth 2020; Peterson and Jones 2016; Veselková 2014) but has been rarely empirically studied (for an exception, see Ney 2014). Macro-level narratives are an expression of cultural values and are embedded in institutional contexts. It may be assumed that macro narratives vary in different cultural and institutional contexts. Thus, an empirical analysis of macro narratives is important when addressing the question of how well the NPF travels to different contexts.

The lack of empirical NPF macro applications raises the question of why NPF research has not focused on macro narratives. One reason could be the lack of clarity by NPF scholars about the macro level. Peterson (2021, p. 4)⁶ maintains that the NPF does not really define the macro level and “leave[s] open the work of empirical and theoretical analysis for others.” Shanahan et al. (2017, p. 195) rely on Danforth (2016, p. 584) to define macro-level narratives as “communal, historical narratives that are expansive enough to explain a variety of human events across time and place.” Despite describing macro-level narratives as grand narratives that create socially constructed realities expressed, in turn, as institutions and cultural norms (Shanahan et al. 2017, p. 195), NPF scholars understandably have had difficulty operationalizing macro-level narratives. The NPF maintains that macro-level narratives are composed like any narrative, with narrative elements that can be an-

⁶ This study was not included in our database because it was published in August 2021, and the database includes only articles published up to July 2021. We still consider it here for the discussion.

alyzed empirically. However, macro-level narratives are widely assumed and thus difficult to uncover. Sievers and Jones (2020) suggest historical content analysis or event history analysis, while Peterson (2021) understands macro-level narratives as narratives used at the macro political institutional level.

In short, the NPF describes macro narratives as stable over large periods of time, forming the boundaries around which meso and micro narratives emerge. However, the NPF also remains largely silent on how best to both locate and operationalize this level of analysis. The ambiguity is derivative of the simple lack of research produced at this level of analysis. However, in our opinion, the ambiguity does not hinder the NPF's traveling capacities; rather, it might well be doing the exact opposite. Given the lack of NPF macro-level orthodoxy, this area of the NPF is ripe for exactly the kind of methodological and theoretical innovation that could come from applying the NPF in different contexts, provided, of course, that the said innovations stay true to NPF assumptions.

4.7 Journeys Along Different Methodological Approaches

Narrative policy framework applications use a variety of different methods of data collection. Table 4 shows how many NPF studies included content analyses, interviews (including focus groups), surveys, and observations to collect data.

First, content analysis was the most frequently used method of data collection; 90 (73%) of the 124 empirical NPF applications used content analysis as a method to collect data⁷. This is in line with the result that the majority of NPF applications are meso-level studies. Meso-level analyses typically use content analysis to examine policy narratives employed by policy actors (Shanahan et al. 2018, p. 339).

Figure 1 shows which data sources are used for content analysis. Newspaper articles and offline documents (such as policy documents, reports, and legislation) have most frequently been used as data sources.

Second, the analysis also shows that a high number of authors of the examined articles (31 articles, or 25% of the 124 articles) used interviews as a method of data

Table 4 Methods

Methods	Used in <i>n</i> studies
Content analysis	90
Interviews	31
Surveys	28
Observation	6

Table 5 Methodological approaches

Methodological approach	<i>n</i>	%
Quantitative	59	47.5
Qualitative	33	26.6
Mixed	32	25.8
<i>Total</i>	<i>124</i>	<i>100</i>

⁷ Several studies used more than one method. That is why the total in Table 4 is higher than the total number of studies in our database.

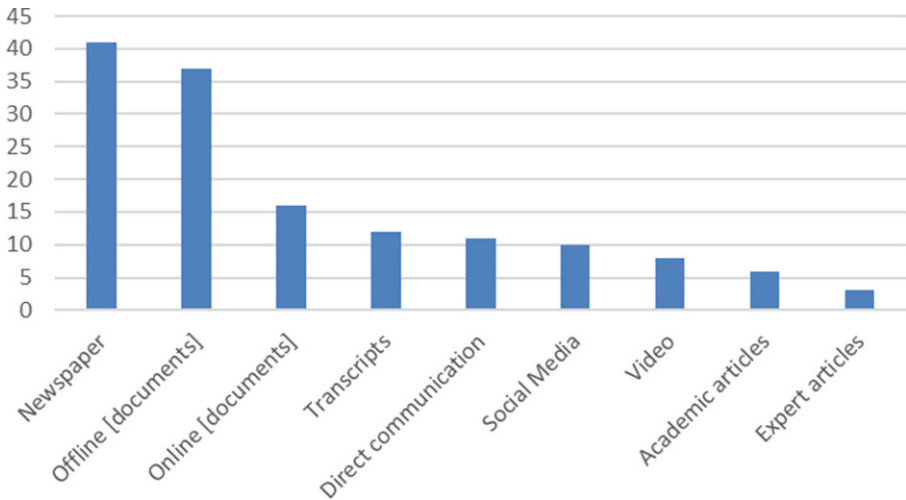


Fig. 1 Frequency of data categories used in Narrative Policy Framework content analysis

collection. Some of them treated interviews as a primary data source to examine which narratives appeared in the interviews (e.g., Gray and Jones 2016), or they used expert interviews to validate policy actors' narratives (e.g., Kear and Wells 2014). Others used interviews to better understand the policy preferences of policy actors (Schlauffer et al. 2021b). Yet another group of authors included the use of interviews to identify the most relevant policy actors in a debate but not as a source for narratives (e.g., Heikkila et al. 2014; Weible et al. 2016).

Third, surveys were used in 28 (23%) NPF applications (Table 4). Surveys were typically used with micro-level NPF studies (Shanahan et al. 2018, p. 338). This was confirmed by our analysis: 24 (86%) of the 28 NPF applications using survey data are micro-level applications, and the other four are meso-level applications.

The NPF brought empiricism to the study of narratives (Shanahan et al. 2013). Empirical work can be quantitative or qualitative, as qualitative data can also be verifiable through transparent, systematic analyses (Gray and Jones 2016). Table 5 reveals the number of studies that employ a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach.

Almost half (47.5%, $n=59$) of NPF applications use quantitative methods of data analysis. Nonetheless, 26.6% use exclusively qualitative methods, while 25.8% employ both quantitative and qualitative methods. These results reflect the NPF's methodological openness, as well as its initial emphasis on quantitative methods.

4.8 New Methods and Data Sources and What Remains To Be Explored

We would like to point to two types of data sources that are a relatively recent discovery of the NPF. The first is social media. Our analysis identified only 10 articles using social media as data sources.⁸ This number is rather low, considering the

⁸ This count excludes YouTube. YouTube videos were subsumed in the category videos.

growing importance of social media for public debates. Moreover, recent NPF studies have shown that the NPF can be used in the analysis of debates on social media (Gupta et al. 2018; Merry 2016a, b, 2018). Even when the most recent empirical NPF applications (2020–2021) were examined, only a minority were found to use social media as a data source—only six of the 34 empirical articles (18%).

The second unexplored territory consists of visual narratives. The large majority of NPF research focuses on narratives found in written or spoken texts. Only a small minority have analyzed visual narratives (e.g., Boscarino 2022) or videos (e.g., McBeth et al. 2012).

4.9 Journeys to Other Theories of the Policy Process

The review of 157 NPF articles showed that 33 articles (21%) mention other theories of the policy process. However, only 18 (11%) actually feature a substantial examination of other policy process frameworks that simultaneously includes an empirical analysis. Thus, the journeys to other theories of the policy process remain, overall, a rather rare phenomenon. Of those that incorporate other frameworks, most articles use the NPF in combination with a single public policy framework; only three articles combine the NPF with more than one other policy process framework (McBeth et al. 2007; Rodrigues Neto and Barcelos 2020; Townsend et al. 2020).

Table 6 shows that the NPF has most frequently been used in combination with the ACF, followed by the MSF and the SCTG. We identified three different ways that the NPF is used with other policy process theories. First, the authors of a few articles applied multiple theories in parallel to analyze one case. These studies do not merge frameworks but apply several frameworks simultaneously to analyze different aspects of one case. The frameworks complement each other and help researchers gain a better understanding of their case (e.g., Mosley and Gibson 2017; Townsend et al. 2020). Second, other researchers used the NPF to specify or operationalize one specific aspect of another theory (Leong 2015; Shanahan et al. 2011; Soremi 2019), or they used another theory to specify an aspect of the NPF (McBeth and Lybecker 2018; Yabar 2021). Third, the NPF has been merged with another framework, with both of them having equal status. This has been done in research using SCTG and the NPF, where the social constructions of target groups are associated with narrative characters (Cline 2015; Husmann 2015; Lybecker et al. 2015), as well as in a recent publication merging the NPF with the Institutional Grammar Tool, a subframework emerging from the IAD (Dunlop et al. 2021).

Table 6 Use of the narrative policy framework with other policy process frameworks

Policy process framework	<i>n</i>
Advocacy Coalition Framework	7
Multiple Streams Framework	6
Social Construction of Target Groups	5
Punctuated Equilibrium Theory	3
Policy Feedback Theory	1
Institutional Analysis and Development Framework	1
Innovation and diffusion models of policy research	1

4.10 New Theoretical Explorations

It is important to note that the NPF began as an independent framework and did so with an eye toward integrating with the other major policy process frameworks as it evolved (Jones and McBeth 2010, p. 9; Shanahan et al. 2011, 2018). Combinations of the NPF with the ACF are most frequent, as early NPF research sought to complement the ACF by showing that narratives are highly relevant in coalitional research (McBeth et al. 2005, 2007; Shanahan et al. 2011). Moreover, some of the elements of the NPF have their origins in the ACF, such as the devil-shift strategy (Sabatier et al. 1987; Shanahan et al. 2013). Table 6 shows that NPF's journeys to the realms of the MSF and SCTG are also common among multiple theory applications. However, other policy process theories have been applied in combination with the NPF only once: policy feedback theory (Townsend et al. 2020), the IAD (Dunlop et al. 2021), and diffusion models (Soremi 2019). Several potential factors could explain this finding. First, institutions play an important role in both policy feedback theory and in the IAD. While policy feedback has a historical institutionalist background to examine the impact of existing policies on policy development (Béland 2010), the IAD focuses on institutional arrangements. The role of institutions in the NPF has been arguably underspecified, and as such it is not surprising that there are few studies. Second, only a few NPF applications examine the global level (exceptions are Beck 2018; Fløttum and Gjerstad 2017; Gjerstad 2017) or compare the deployment of narratives across regions. This might explain the rare combination of the NPF with the policy diffusion and policy transfer literature.

More broadly, the lack of pairing of the NPF with other policy process frameworks could be derivative of several more general factors. Above we reference the theoretical difficulty in integrating the IAD and NPF in a complementary fashion. However, more practical issues may arise. Cairney (2013) describes several approaches to using multiple policy process frameworks, including synthesis, complementary, and contradictory (i.e., comparative) uses, all of which suffer from some general issues. First, there is the practical matter of using two or more frameworks. It simply requires more expertise, more time, and usually more resources for the actual implementation of the research. There are also potential issues of different standards of rigor, divergent assumptions, and different levels of analysis, as well as theoretical issues derived from using the same language but defining terms differently. For example, PET defines institutions as organizations, whereas the IAD defines institutions as rules (see Heikkila and Jones 2022). However, most of these issues are endemic to the theoretical integration of research approaches in general, not specifically to the integration of the NPF with other frameworks. Our analysis indicates that the NPF is easily fitted to any of the major policy process frameworks because they do not theoretically account for policy narratives in an empirical manner, which is precisely what the NPF is designed to do. That is, the NPF makes adding a policy narrative independent variable to a model a fairly straightforward endeavor, whether qualitative or quantitative.

5 Discussion: What Needs To Be Considered When Applying the NPF in New Territory?

The purpose of theorizing about the policy process is to understand a policy phenomenon beyond a single case. Theories define concepts and test propositions of how these concepts operate in relationship to one another to explain the phenomenon under question. The NPF has identified narratives (form and content) as central to policy persuasion and attention. Since the seminal naming of the NPF (Jones and McBeth 2010), the NPF has matured. One way to capture the extent of the NPF's maturation (and areas of needed growth) is to examine the extent to which the NPF has "traveled" across geographies, political regimes, methods, and policy contexts. Considering the ability of any theory to "travel" is really an exercise in the veracity of the theory itself.

While the NPF has a high degree of traveling capacity, it remains new on its journey geographically, methodologically, across policy fields, and in tandem with other policy process theories. As our inquiry found, the NPF's itinerary remained mostly in the U.S. and European contexts, focused on the field of environmental policy at the meso level, and relied on the content analysis of public-consumption documents. The reasons for these more limited explorations are simple. The framework started in the United States and was carried across the ocean by adventurous and curious European policy scholars. The environmental focus is a reflection of the interests of early NPF scholars and is not endemic to the framework itself. The first decade of the NPF was spent, appropriately, testing whether the framework had validity. Science requires building knowledge iteratively, and early NPF scholars were charged with understanding whether narratives could, in fact, be empirically measured. As the NPF's validity became apparent, the framework then became popular for two reasons. First, narrative data—particularly at the meso level—are free, making the framework portable to regions with robust policy debates. Second, the NPF is clear regarding its assumptions and conceptual definitions, making NPF studies replicable across different contexts.

Our review suggests that the NPF is well provisioned for further journeys well into the future. As the diffusion of the NPF continues to make its way into curricula around the globe, it is with the next generation of policy scholars that the NPF will reach new destinations. Empirical studies in new settings provide evidence that narrative elements may be found in a variety of different cultural and political contexts. We would like to point to two aspects that stand out as scholars consider applying the NPF outside of its current spheres of application.

First, NPF studies need to adhere to the NPF's assumptions. While this may seem obvious, many policy studies do not make their assumptions explicit. Researchers wishing to apply the NPF in a new context should carefully check whether their research assumptions align with the assumptions of the NPF. If NPF assumptions are violated, the NPF is not the right framework (Shanahan et al. 2018; Jones 2018). However, our review suggests that the assumptions of the NPF will hold in varied contexts. So, the assumptions are not a barrier to exploring new territories.

Second, NPF researchers should carefully think about whether and why an analysis of narratives matters in their context. Our findings show that the large majority

of NPF applications are meso-level studies that describe the narratives employed by policy actors operating as part of a group or coalition in policy debates (e.g., Shanahan et al. 2013). These studies confirm that narratives are used in policy debates in a variety of contexts. However, not much is known about how these narratives *affect* the policy process or policy outputs. That is, where policy narratives originate, whom they impact, and to what effect are all important policy narrative questions that are rarely addressed simultaneously.⁹ Thus, NPF research is usually at least implicitly assuming that narratives have an impact on policy, which is likely contingent on a specific context. Our findings indicate that in the context of liberal democracies, such an assumption applies. Is such an assumption applicable in nondemocratic institutional contexts that do not allow for open public debates and where public debates may not have an influence on policy processes? This is an empirical question. Moreover, if so, does it matter where narratives originate—such as from the public or from the elite? In the case of the former, traditional NPF data and methods (e.g., surveys and/or content analysis) are shown to be appropriate; for the latter, however, a researcher would likely need to rely upon interviews or participant observation and would most definitely need access. Moreover, where might researchers look to assess narrative influence? Perhaps legislatures in one context and bureaucracies in another? In any case, our review indicates that future NPF travels could focus on the impact of narratives at different stages of the policy cycle in both democratic and nondemocratic systems.

Our findings also identified other important research gaps that point to potential future research. First, it remains an open question of how well the typical narrative elements of American and European NPF studies are applicable in different cultural contexts. For example, while stories in all contexts contain characters (given that we are *homo narrans*), the array of characters and trajectories of plots may reveal differences across cultures. Thus, further travels may expand or modify the original narrative elements when applied in new cultural contexts. The good news is that the structural approach of the NPF was designed for this sort of adaptability and for the incorporation of new variations of narrative elements (Shanahan et al. 2017).

Second, replicating experiments in variable settings to analyze whether the same narratives are persuasive in different contexts would provide important knowledge on the persuasiveness of narratives across said contexts. Additionally, repeating research designs across geographic localities and types of governmental regimes will reveal the potential transportability of the NPF. Given the relative newness of the NPF to policy process theories, the diffusion of its use is in its early stages.

Third, it is most difficult to capture narratives that are not disseminated, as occurs with low-salience, low-conflict, or highly technical policy processes. The lack of macro-level analyses may also be the result of an absence of metanarratives, as these are largely assumed culturally as opposed to being expressed in policy narratives. This raises the question of how well the NPF's approach of operationalizing narratives works in all instances. New territory for NPF scholars is to build innovations to capture hidden, minority, silenced, and assumed narratives (e.g., requiring

⁹ But see Gottlieb et al. (2018), Laufer and Jones (2021), and McMorris et al. (2018) for notable exceptions to this trend.

a different set of techniques such as trace analysis or political development) in order to empirically measure overarching macro narratives over long periods of time that are embedded in cultural contexts.

We suggest that qualitative and interpretive analysis remain essential to examine these missing parts of the NPF (Jones and Radaelli 2016). The NPF allows for both qualitative analysis and interpretive work (Gray and Jones 2016; Jones and McBeth 2020; Jones and Radaelli 2015; Sievers and Jones 2020). These questions do not present obstacles to the NPF's portability, but, rather, a bold itinerary that will advance our understanding of narratives in the policy process.

6 Conclusions

This special issue posits the question of how far public policy theories can travel and what needs to be considered when applying them across different settings. The purpose of this article was to examine the NPF's travel capacities. In other words, how generalizable is the NPF across geographies, political systems, levels of analysis, data sources, and other theories of the policy process? The results of a systematic review of previous NPF research reveal that the NPF brings about necessary *requirements* to be applicable in different contexts. In other words, the potential of NPF travel is greater than the praxis shows today. Indeed, empirical applications remain focused on the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, the European context. Most studies focus on the meso level of analysis and use media and documents as data sources, while combinations of the NPF with other theories of the policy process remain rare.

To date, the NPF's travels are nascent. Early NPF work was focused on testing the NPF as a valid theory. Given that the framework was developed in the United States, it naturally follows that the policy cases were U.S.-based as NPF scholars worked to iteratively test the theoretical scaffolding of the framework. After early NPF scholarship established the validity and reliability of narrative concepts in the U.S. policy context, diffusion of the NPF as a viable policy process framework took hold first in western Europe and is now matriculating globally to locations such as Russia, Asia, and Africa. Thus, the transportability of the NPF across geographies, political systems, levels of analysis, data sources, methods, and other policy process theories is in its beginnings. However, NPF scholars have their scholarly bags packed, ready to travel with the NPF across different contexts of governance, levels of analysis, methods, and theories.

7 Appendix

Table 7 Coding scheme for Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) articles

Name of variable	Description of variable, coding instructions
Empirical	Is the article an empirical or theoretical article? 0= Theoretical/conceptual article, including literature reviews 1= Empirical article
Geographic context	In what country/countries is the NPF applied? Type the country
Policy field	What policy fields are examined? 1= Environment (including climate change, environmental risks and disaster, waste) 2= Health (including obesity, tobacco control) 3= Education 4= Social policy (including child protection) 5= Economics and finance (including labor policy) 7= Urban policy and transportation, housing, infrastructure 8= Science and technology (including agrotechnology, biotechnology) 9= Migration (including sanctuary cities, border control) 10= Law, order, crime, criminal justice 11= Institutional policies (including civil rights, government operations) 12= Campaign finance 13= Drug policy 14= Gun policy 15= Energy (including fracking) 16= Others/various policies
Level of analysis	On which levels of analysis does the NPF application focus? 1= Micro 2= Meso 3= Macro 4= Micro and meso 5= Meso and macro 6= All three
Methods	What methods are used? 1= Survey methods 2= Interviews/focus groups 3= Content analysis 4= Observation na= Not mentioned, unclear
Methodological approach	What methodological approach is used? 1= Quantitative 2= Qualitative 3= Both/mixed
Data sources	For articles using content analysis, what data sources are used? Type all data sources
Theories	What other theories of the policy process are used? 1= ACF 2= MSF 3= PET 4= SCTG 5= Policy feedback 6= IAD 7= Policy diffusion models

Table 8 Categories of data sources for content analysis

Category	Data types that the category contains
Social media	Twitter, social media, Facebook posts
Transcripts	Legislative testimonies; speeches; parliamentary debates; city council meeting recordings; transcripts from federal legislative, executive, and judicial venues; legislative records of bills; parliamentary minutes; governmental press conferences
Newspapers	Newspapers (articles), news media, news reports
Academic articles	Journal articles, scientific articles, academic articles
Expert articles	Expert journals, scientific journals, publications addressed to public sector practitioners
Online (documents)	Web data, online documents, blogs, online presentations, online news media, Google trends, websites
Direct communication	Emails, newsletters, press releases
Offline (documents)	Reports, documents, policy documents, books, government information items, offline documents, law proposals, legislation, statistics
Video	TV news, TV programs, videos, YouTube videos

Table 9 Intercoder agreement

Variable	Percentage agreement (%)	Krippendorff's alpha
Geography	98.1	0.97
Policy field	92.5	0.91
Level	96.2	0.92
Methods	94.3	0.88
Quantitative/qualitative	92.5	0.88
Data sources	88.7	0.82
Theories	83.0	0.79

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